Papers on The War

By Daniel Ellsberg.
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By MURRAY KEMPTON

"(Melville) was born for Purgatory. Some souls are purgatorial by destiny.

"(Captain Ahab and his mates) are rather like Mr. Wilson and his admirable efficient crew at the Peace Conference.

"A maniac captain of the soul and three eminently practical mates.

"America!"

—D. H. Lawrence, "Studies in Classic American Literature."

John Paul Vann, a provincial representative of the Agency for International Development, was Daniel Ellsberg's guide in October of 1965 when he undertook his first intimate tour of a disputed area in South Vietnam. Their six weeks' voyaging took them into places where the Government had abandoned all but the shabbiest pretense of control.

"At one point," Ellsberg would recall, "we passed a gathering of a dozen black-clad boys in their early twenties: draft age but not in 'our army'. 'There's little doubt that you're looking at a VC squad,' Vann said, so I took a picture. They straightened up and smiled. ('The fact is they looked too clean-cut to be GVN,' Vann muttered.)"

Vann and Ellsberg make attractive *compagnons de la route*, especially Vann who was then in full command of that respect for his enemy, that cynical but genuine affection for his clients, that contempt for the carelessness and the cruelty of his superiors, which combined to establish his legend. Eminently practical mates aware of every flaw in the caulking.

And yet purgatorial by destiny. When Vann was killed last June, his final office was the management of those B-52 strikes that were all the resource left him against the army of General Giap. He had summoned the Air Force he hated against the people he had so much liked. Lawrence Stern of The Washington Post found him at this last post two weeks before he was killed.

"Any time the wind is blowing from the north where the B-52 strikes are turning the terrain into a moonscape," Vann told Stern, "you can tell from the battlefield stench that the strikes are effective."

Here is a speech of such intense and hopeless despair as almost to suggest a self-willed death. There are all kinds of apostasy. Ellsberg was at the moment preparing his defense against the criminal charge of having broadcast the Pentagon Papers "in hope I still hold: that truths that changed me could help Americans free themselves and other victims from our longest war." For him, as for Vann, the *Via Media* had been pulverized. He paused, put aside his brief awhile, and went to Vann's funeral in Washington, where he could hardly have been a welcome ghost. Still purgatorial by destiny.

Ellsberg's recollection of that lost time with Vann is among the very few intimacies he provides in papers surprisingly impersonal by our standards of prior experience with the testament of apostates. Their general freedom from strenuous effort at self-revelation is one of their merits; the act of contrition as literary exercise has run pretty steadily downhill through the centuries even for those of us who are not altogether sure that St. Augustine got it off to all that good a start in the first place. It is a form of discourse that can all too often suggest that confession is quite bad for the soul.

Ellsberg is by no means immune to fascination by the drama of his own life, and he does conclude these fragments with an address on "The Responsibility of Intellectuals in a Criminal War," which gives way to flayings of his own flesh not altogether appetizing. He opens by saying that he is the only person present at most of the assemblies he frequents these days who is a potential defendant at a war crimes trial. This is a self-introduction of the most meager felicity, since it at once inflates the speaker as a historical presence and shrinks him into an occasion for laughter from his audience. This sort of thing is in the latter case too far beneath the very real dignity that Ellsberg displays in every other area and in the former too far beyond the scrupulous accuracy of reference that is his most steadfast virtue.

He does go about with the look of one who has known agonies in gardens, but the habit of playing roles is an understandable scar of the Vietnam experience. The appointed [illegible] much a mixture of the deluding of the self with the deluding of others (since it was a war of reports, one must always have been reporting or conscious of being reported upon) that Ellsberg's memories of its paramilitary intelligentsia evoke for us the sense less of comrades than of actors on stage together. Vann, for example, seems entirely authentic in the whole heartbreaking range of his roles, now the friendly dispenser of chocolate bars, then the implacable assembler of cannons; still his spoken lines sound almost written for dramatic effect; in him we have the genuine tragic hero played by the tragic actor.

So Ellsberg, actor, is apt to distract us from Ellsberg, actual; and it comes as a surprise to decide that his conversion, sincere though its fervor clearly is, came less from the disordered soul than from the sober intellect. The experience was analytical rather than mystical; he was changed by the slow Word rather than by the sudden Light. It was a transformation whose closest parallel is the quiet and studious progress described in Newman's "Apologia." Perplexity, not agony, was its motor; and we do Ellsberg's keen powers of reason insufficient justice if we think of him as pilgrim starting affrighted with his sins and the burden of his misery.

The beginnings of his career have about them some intimations of the young man making his way. He took orders quite young in the service of that church of systems analysis, which, as Newman said of Anglicanism, "has always been in the closest dependence on the civil power and has always gloried in this." He began at Harvard with economic games theory, entered the Marines, and returned to quasi-civilian life in 1959 to join the Rand Corporation as an economist studying the missile gap. I rely for this summation of Ellsberg's employment history less on him than on the not over-generous but still useful account provided by Sanford Ungar in "The Papers and The Papers" [Dutton, 1972].

As central cookery for serving the behavioral sciences to the national security system, Rand had, of course, many parties to cater, and it would be a while before Ellsberg joined its retinue of stewards to

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